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HINDU  
DANCING

By

Sri RAGINI



RAMA VARMA RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
TRICHUR, COCHIN STATE.

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# N R I T A N J A L I





**RAMA VARMA RESEARCH INSTITUTE.  
TRICHUR, COCHIN STATE.**

**2 MAR 1931**





Sri Ragini

# NRITANJALI

AN INTRODUCTION

to

## HINDU DANCING

By

Sri RAGDNI



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## C O N T E N T S

### *Introduction:*

### HINDU MUSIC AND DANCING IN AMERICA

By Mary K. Das 13

I.	SPIRIT OF HINDU ART .....	23
II.	DANCE-CYCLES OF THE GODS .....	29
III.	CONSCIOUS DISCIPLINE OF THE THEATRE .....	33
IV.	DANCE FORMS .....	41
V.	SYMBOLISM AND GESTURE .....	53
VI.	PLASTIC HARMONY OF MOVEMENT .....	69
VII.	RACE-SPIRIT AND THE DANCE .....	79



## ILLUSTRATIONS

**SRI RAGINI**     "     "     "     "     "     "     **Frontispiece**

*Photo by Charles Albin*

<b>SHIVA — THE COSMIC DANCER</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	15
<b>KRISHNA — THE DIVINE FLUTE PLAYER</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	22
<b>RADHA — IN THE RAS DANCE</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	28
<b>APSARA DANCE</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	37
<b>SAMABHANGA — A GRACIOUS MOOD</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	43
<b>VIR — THE HEROIC MOOD</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	49
<b>ARDHA CHANDRA HAND</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	60
<b>GAJA HAND</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
<b>KATAKA HAND</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	65
<b>ARDHA CHANDRA HAND FOR HOLDING FIRE</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
<b>BHRAMARA HAND</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	72
<b>HAMSASYA HAND</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"
<b>KRISHNA AND GOPI MUSICIANS</b>	"	"	"	"	"	"	81

*Dance postures by Sri Ragini  
Photographed by White Studio*

*Mudras — hand postures — posed by Sri Ragini  
Photographed by Peter A. Dietz*



## INTRODUCTION

### HINDU MUSIC AND DANCING IN AMERICA

¶ India's contribution to the cultural life of the world is immense. In religion, philosophy and positive science, the influence of Hindu thought has been permanent; and today this fact is universally recognized. Hindu influence in the fine arts—architecture, painting, music etc.—is no less significant, although less recognized by the people of the West.

¶ In the West, in the field of music and dancing a new era has come. On the one hand, a large number of restless people are seeking for a new road to newer sensation or sensualism, and exhibiting an unrestrained craze for so-called new music known as

## NRITANJALI

"Jazz"; on the other hand, some serious students of music and dancing find in Hindu music and dances new inspiration, not sensual, which stirs one's soul and leads to sublime ecstasy.

¶ The music of the future will embody new ideas of harmony and melody—finer notes, intricate and subtle variations and improvisations which will exemplify the beauty of "Ragas" of Hindu music. Spiritual communion through music, enchanting life through music, soothing nerves and creating harmony and poise in everyday life through music, depicting deepest emotions of life, are a few phases of Hindu music, the divine art.

¶ In all ages and among all peoples, dancing has played a significant part in the finer as well as coarser spheres of life. Religious dances, folk dances with all simplicity often give clearer interpretations of the mode of life of a people than written volumes. Hindu dancing in its varied phases is now attracting attention of many, who seek charm and beauty of human movements and expressions. Some time ago, Mme. Ruth St. Denis introduced a few postures of



*Shiva — The Cosmic Dancer*

*Atibhanga Flexion*



## NRITANJALI

Hindu dancing in her programme, and Mme. Pavlowa lately in ballet productions incorporated something of Hindu dancing. However, Sri Ragini is the first one, so far as my knowledge goes, who has presented a comprehensive program of Indian music and dancing to the American public.

¶ Fortunately, Ragini is not an ordinary dancer or singer; but she is an artist of extraordinary ability. She, with her thorough knowledge of ancient Hindu music, is trying to give that interpretation of music and dancing of the Hindus, which the West can appreciate and understand. She interprets the music, ancient and modern, including, the spirit of the sublimest poems of Dr. Rabindranath Tagore, depicting pathos, love and guileless simplicity, where vulgarity has no place. She is imbued with a spirit of exaltation in beauty and conscious of her mission, which she once described to me as follows:—

¶ "One of the finest phases of Hindu life—their music and dancing must not be allowed to remain unknown to the world. The world should know of it; and the great masters should ponder over the

## NRITANJALI

possibility of its revival and renovation for the whole world. Russian music and dancing have acquired distinction in the world of fine arts; similarly, if properly interpreted, Hindu music and dancing can very easily do the same. Some people who love Hindu music and dancing must give their lives to it. I love India and I am trying to find the beauty of my life through Hindu music and dancing to which I have consecrated my life."

¶ Ragini is the most out-standing and unique pioneer, engaged in interpreting the best of Hindu music and dancing to the West.

¶ Sri Ragini has a charming personality and excellent voice, necessary and indispensable requisites for success: She began her work quietly and today she has received national recognition in America. She is sought among select circles for her performances. Sri Ragini is not only an accomplished singer and dancer, but she also plays the "Sitar and Tambura" exquisitely.

¶ The music lovers of the West are grateful to

## NRITANJALI

Ragini for her work of introducing and popularizing something so beautiful of the life of The Orient; and the people of India may well be proud of her achievement and devotion to her mission.

MARY K. DAS,

*Munich, Germany*



2 MAR 1931







Krishna — *The Divine Flute Player*

# I

## THE SPIRIT OF HINDU ART

- Since time immemorial the sacramental view of life has permeated all forms of Hindu art. The Hindus believe that Creative Nature is the manifested Will-Force of God. From the cyclic motion of the planets to the innermost experiences of the human soul through the senses and emotions, all cosmic being has its source, activity and final culmination in the Supreme Being.
- The manifestation of cosmic activity is represented in Hinduism by the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who symbolize the powers of creation, preservation and destruction.
- God the blissful, the beautiful and the beneficent;

## NRITANJALI

God the terrific destroyer of evil and the Lord of death, has been worshipped through the ages in India in many aspects, in many forms and by means of a symbolic ritual which included music and dancing.

¶ Hindu art-consciousness had its origin in early Aryan worship, and gradually evolved itself into an ideal race-experience. It became a three-fold expression of life in terms of Nature, the Soul and Humanity.

¶ The artist, according to the injunction of Hindu canons, was to withdraw himself from turmoil and distraction, to enter into the Inner Silence and draw forth from his heart the form of Beauty.

¶ "It may sometimes be difficult for a non-Hindu fully to appreciate the images and paintings of India because their conventions and motifs are so peculiarly Hindu. Exactly the same difficulty arises with regard to Western art. Who but a Christian can find inspiration in a *Last Supper* or a *Holy Family* or a God dividing light from darkness? For that

## NRITANJALI

matter, even the *Aeneid* would be unintelligible to the modern Eur-American lovers of poetry unless they made it a point to study Roman history. Nay, a well-educated Jew may naturally fail to respond to the sentiments in the *Divine Comedy* or Signorelli's *Scenes from Dante*."

¶ "But the difficulties of appreciation by foreigners do not make an art-work necessarily "local" or racial. It may still be universal in its appeal and thoroughly humanistic. There are hardly any people who in modern times can enter into the spirit of the *Ka* statues which stand by the sarcophagi in the cave tombs of the Pharaohs. And yet how essentially akin to modern mankind were the Egyptians if we can depend on the evidence of their letters! A *Ka* is described in one of the inscriptions thus: 'He was an exceptional man; wise, learned, displaying true moderation of mind, distinguishing the wise man from the fool; a father to the unfortunate, a mother to the motherless, the terror of the cruel, the protector of the disinherited, the defender of the oppressed, the husband of the widow, the refuge of the orphan.' There is no gap in funda-

## NRITANJALI

mental humanity between the men and women of to-day and the race that could write such an epitaph, in spite of the fact that many of its conventions and usages seem entirely meaningless."

¶ "The student of foreign literature has specially to qualify himself in order that he may understand the unfamiliar idioms of its language and the peculiar turns of expression. No other qualification is demanded in modern men and women for an appreciation of the old and distant carvings, statuettes and drawings. The chief desideratum is really an honest patience with the racial modes and paraphernalia of foreign art." \*

¶ Art is a universal language which races of all regions can understand. Each civilization has its own mode of expression, its architecture and its art. Each culture is different, but each makes an important contribution to a great and ever-widening world-civilization.

\**An Introduction to Hindu Art* by Benoy Kumar Sarkar.





Radha -- In the Ras Dance

## II

### DANCE CYCLES OF THE GODS

¶ The dance has been one of the chief forms of religious expression in India since time immemorial. The Hindu dance is conceived as an expression of spiritual energy on the earth plane through the senses and intelligence. The rhythmic, supple movement of limbs, the ripple of form, the geometric contours and bends in space are essentially related to the Universal laws of harmony and rhythm. The cyclic whirls of the dance portray the circling processes of the spheres and the union of the soul with God.

¶ According to the traditions and scriptures of the past, the Vedic Aryans personified the forces of nature as divine beings called gods and goddesses.

## NRITANJALI

The mythological heaven of Indra (God of Rain) was inhabited by Gandharvas (divine singers), Apsaras (dancing nymphs) and Kinnaras (players upon musical instruments). Chants of invocation addressed to these various god-aspects were accompanied by dancing.

● Shiva, Lord of Creation, was the first dancer. Encircled by the celestial host of gods and goddesses, he danced his form infinite and eternal, expressing in an ecstasy of motion the great cosmic activities of Creation, Preservation and Destruction.

● Hindu religious conceptions being conjugal rather than filial, God in his various aspects or manifestations, is associated with a feminine counterpart. The consort of Shiva is Parvati, also known as Uma, Gauri, Durga and Kali, who represents the powers without which there could be no creation or evolution.

● Laksmi, the Hindu Venus, and consort of Vishnu, the preserver of forms in nature, was the first classical dancer of heaven. Adorned with jewels

## NRITANJALI

and wearing anklets of bells, she danced with a divine grace that completely won the acclaim of Indra's court and made her at once the peer of the heavenly nymphs to whom she taught her art. She is said to have imparted this divine knowledge to human beings.

¶ The eight Shaktis or Energies of the protecting God Vishnu were the personification of beneficent activities of the Universe. They were called the Goddesses of Wealth, Earth, Learning, Love, Peace, Pleasure and Strength.

¶ The Apsaras or heavenly nymphs, beautiful and accomplished and adorned with ornaments, are described as "broad-hipped, slender waisted, powerful and graceful as panthers. Their supple waists, palms, fingers beseech, explain, deprecate and caress."

¶ Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu is represented as playing the bamboo flute under the flowering Tree of Life. He is dressed in yellow garments, adorned with various ornaments and

## NRITANJALI

wears a fragrant garland of white jasmine flowers. The gold crown upon his head is decorated with peacock feathers.

¶ The Ras Dance of Krishna, the Divine flute player, with Radha, his consort, attended by many enamoured devotees—milkmaids of Brindaban—has an underlying spiritual significance. The music of Krishna's flute is the Celestial song of songs calling the individual soul to God. Radha is the love-energy of creation. Her companions are the souls of men, responding to the appeal of the Infinite and Eternal.

¶ The Rama and Krishna epics and the Hindu ritual worship have enriched the spirituality and art-consciousness of Java, Cambodia, Bali and Siam. In Tibet and China the influence of Buddhism is shown in the symbolic postures of sacred images.

2 MARCH 1951

III

CONSCIOUS DISCIPLINE OF THE  
THEATRE

¶ In Hinduism the emotions are spiritualized, idealized and universalized as emanating from the divine Source and Substance of all emotions, namely God. Emotional culture through drama, music and dancing are not only a means of spiritual understanding but a necessary method of character development. Character means well-regulated emotion. Dancing and music in India were considered excellent regulators of the emotions. The venerable Brahmans who defined and practised the fine arts in the past believed that ill-regulated emotion ruined life and destroyed happiness. Thus it was that the Hindu drama, which included both vocal and instrumental music and dancing, became the medium

## NRITANJALI

of interpretation for religion, nature and human aspiration—a source of both joy and discipline to participants and beholders.

¶ The Natya Shastra was spoken of as the fifth Veda (sacred treatise) and the sage Bharata, who revealed it, was regarded as the stage manager of the gods. He was said to have received a revelation of the art of the theatre direct from Brahma, the Creator, who entered into meditation and from the depths of divine thought brought forth the arts of drama, music and dancing for the joy of the universe.

¶ The purpose of the Natya Shastra was the attainment of the four *purusharthas* or objects of human pursuit, namely: *Dharma*—the ethical and spiritual development of the individual. *Artha*—social and civic life and the acquirement of wealth. *Kama*—conjugal life, and the pleasures of environment. *Moksha*—the attainment of final salvation.

¶ Every Hindu performance began and ended with a benediction (Nandi).

## NRITANJALI

- The Nayaka or master of dancing, was required not only to be learned in every branch of his art, but his character must be free from blemish.
- Only those persons who were intelligent, thoughtful, appreciative, just, free from vanity and conversant with the arts were worthy to witness a performance.
- The Nartaki (dancer) never tied the bells about her ankles without first consecrating them.
- After making her salutation to the Gods, the dancer came before the spectators with an offering of flowers which she tossed into the audience.  
(The opening prayer and the flower offering are still continued in Indian performances.)
- According to Hindu definition the emotions (Rasas) which are represented in music, gesture and dance movements, are classified as thirteen in number. They are: *Sringara*, also called *Adi* or the original sex emotion which lies at the very root of creation; *Vir*, meaning valour or heroism; *Karuna*,

## NRITANJALI

pity or compassion; *Adbhuta*, the sense of wonder; *Hasya*, laughter; *Bhayanaika*, fear; *Bibhatsa*, the sense of the grotesque; *Raudra* the terrible; *Shanti*, peace; *Dasya*, devotion and service; *Sakhyta*, friendship; *Vatsalya*, the parental feeling; *Madhura*, romance or conjugal life.

¶ These thirteen Rasas and their subtle variations find expression in the various gestures and postures of the dance. They are also associated with the twenty-two tones of the Hindu octave. The dance modes have therefore to be performed to certain melodies called *Ragas*, and at certain times or seasons.

¶ The joy of Spring and the autumnal mood are dedicated with drama, music and dancing. *Kama*, the Hindu Cupid, rules over the Spring festival. He is the personification of Cosmic Desire and represents the eternal love element in Nature. He bears a flowery bow and five magic arrows of the five senses with which he pierces enraptured hearts.

¶ The annual worship of Durga, the supreme



*Apsara Dance*



## NRITANJALI

mother aspect of life energy and of the vegetation spirit, is performed at harvest time and celebrated with a festival of music and dancing.

¶ The Hindu dance is first of all the representation of the joy of life in all of its ideal aspects. It is concerned with the visible interpretation of the common ideal experience of mankind. Subjective individual experience, colored by personal impulses and idiosyncrasies, does not enter conspicuously into the exposition of either Hindu dancing or music.

¶ Hindu dancing is, for this reason, impersonal and animated by a sense of inner spirituality. Whether it be a ritualistic temple dance or an interpretation of romance or joy in Springtime, it expresses a certain sweet dignity and restraint, a refinement of emotion which it derives from the traditional conception of art that belongs to India.



## IV

### DANCE FORMS

- ¶ All dancing was classified by the Hindu masters as of two kinds, *Margi* and *Desi*. *Margi* dancing was sacred to the gods and was performed only before the gods. *Desi* dancing was performed at entertainments given before princes and assemblies.
- ¶ The dances of celestial beings and the worshipful dances performed in the temples or at sacred festivals were included in the *Margi* system. Many accounts of such dancing are contained in legends and sacred treatises on means of worship.
- ¶ An old Indian legend relates that when the Jaina saint Rishabha Deva beheld the dance performed by Nilanjasa, a female dancer in the service

## NRITANJALI

of the god Indra, he lost all desire for worldly life, and retired to the Kailasa Mountain (reputed abode of Shiva) where he attained to the state of Nirvana.

¶ The *Gnana Samhita* gives explicit injunctions for the performance of dance and music in worship:

¶ "Inspired by the sentiment of devotion, the wise perform worship with dance and music in the first part of the night, and then apply themselves to the repetition of their respective mantras (incantations invoking the appearance of the gods they worship.)"

¶ "Dance and music have again to be performed till the rising of the sun."

¶ In the *Kashi-Khanda* it is ordained that "the man or woman who will fast on the third day of the bright half of the month of Chaitra (March-April), and at dead of night worship Mangala-Gauri (the Bestower of Blessings) with offerings of clothes, ornaments and other articles of worship, and will pass the rest of the night with dance and music, will be rewarded with blessings beyond his or her expectations."



*Samabhanga — A Gracious Mood*



## NRITANJALI

- ¶ Sri Chaitanya, a saintly devotee of Krishna who lived in the early sixteenth century, used to go about singing beautiful hymns in praise of Krishna. "Thus singing he would be filled with ecstasy and, in its fullness, he would be moved into the most graceful dance, the world has ever seen." Thousands of those who beheld him caught his divine spirit and became his devotees.
- ¶ The performance of dancing under most sacred auspices has prevailed in India through countless centuries.
- ¶ The artistic composition of movement and its classification into various types of action is carefully described in the Natya Shastra of Bharata.
- ¶ "Representations by means of bodily movements of various changes which the mind undergoes under the influence of joy, sorrow or other sentiments is called *Natya*." *Natya* actions belong to the drama.
- ¶ Expressive movements of the body which are

## NRITANJALI

accompanied by facial expression and governed by rules of rhythm are called *Nritya* or dancing.

- *Nritta* refers simply to movements of the limbs, and does not involve facial expression.
- Dancing is again divided into two kinds known as *Tandava* and *Lasya*.
- The *Tandava* dance is characterized by intense excitement, the heroic mood (*Vir*) and the touch of wrath. It also expresses cosmic activity, the divine conquest of evil or the attainment of bliss. It is generally performed by males. *Tandava* dancing joined to vocal music often forms a prelude to a certain type of dramatic presentation.
- The *Prekshani* type of *Tandava* is described as movement of the limbs without facial expression. *Bahurupa* *Tandava* includes the exhibition of expression.
- Seven dance modes of Shiva are described in the dance treatises.

## NRITANJALI

The first mode is the Ananda Tandava or the Joyous Dance.

The second mode, the Sandhya Tandava, is the Evening Dance.

The third mode, the Uma Tandava, is danced with his consort Uma.

The fourth mode is with his consort as Gauri.

The fifth mode is the Kalika Tandava, the primitive Kalika form which slays demons of evil and ignorance.

The sixth mode, the Tripura Tandava, represents the slaying of the demon Tripura.

The seventh mode is the Samhara Tandava or dance of death in which Shiva is Lord of the burning ground, meaning that he is that which remains after the annihilation of forms. His dance symbolizes the release of the soul from the bondage of Maya (illusion).

## NRITANJALI

- The consort of Shiva as Durga (the demon slayer), or Kali (the goddess of destruction), appears as a dancer, powerful, and death-dealing, wearing garlands of bones and wielding fearful weapons of destruction. Kali is sometimes worshipped as a war goddess.
- The ecstatic dance of Krishna has none of the terrific aspects of some Shiva-Durga modes, for it is a dance of supreme joy.
- Lasya dancing includes amorous expression and graceful movement of the limbs. It is danced by fair women and their consorts. The Ras Leela of Krishna with the Gopis of Brindaban is of the Lasya kind.
- Laghu dancing is performed by raising the heels slightly and alternately beating them on the floor.
- The humorous element has its legitimate place in Hindu drama and dance. The *Vidushaka* is the Hindu buffoon, and it is said to be the ancient prototype of the buffoon of medieval European drama. \*



*Vir — The Heroic Mood*



## NRITANJALI

¶ Bhringi, the skeleton attendant who accompanies Shiva in certain dance-modes, performs a grotesque travesty dance in imitation of his Lord's rhythmic movements.

¶ In Java, where the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, is performed as a dance-drama, the hero Arjuna is always accompanied by three clowns who represent the powers of good that assist him in conquering his enemies.



\*Piechel, in "The Home of the Puppet-Play."



# V

## SYMBOLISM AND GESTURE

¶ Hindu scriptures are replete with an intricate ideography or symbolism which represents various god aspects, nature forces, the creation of the earth and the evolution of man. Many of these symbols have a very remote ancestry, going back to the Vedic age of the early Aryans.

¶ In India the various god aspects are associated with a *vahan* or conveyance in the form of an animal or bird. Each *vahan* is suggestive of the functions or powers of the deity.

¶ Shiva, whose abode is the Himalaya mountains, rides the bull. In ancient mythology he is known as the lord of agriculture.

## NRITANJALI

¶ Lord Vishnu, whose origin is solar, is carried upon the blazing wings of the Garuda bird, a fabulous, fearful creature with outspread wings. Vishnu is also shown seated upon the coils of the great serpent Adishesha who was said to hold the earth in space.

The ten-armed *Durga* rides a lion.

*Yama*, lord of death rides a buffalo.

*Sarasvati*, goddess of learning and art, rides the peacock.

The *Swastika* is the Hindu cross, a symbol of blessedness and benediction.

A serpent stands for space as well as eternity.

¶ An ancient story relates that Lord Niranjana took off his sacred thread of gold, snapped it asunder and cast it into the waters; and there sprang from it the serpent Vasuki with a thousand hoods. Niranjana gave him the name of Vasuki and bade him bear the burden of these three worlds.

The elephant symbolizes wisdom and firmness of purpose.

## NRITANJALI

An ocean in the mythical sense means a state of consciousness.

The lotus flower represents the universe. Gods are shown seated upon lotus flowers.

¶ It is said that "the Lord created the lotus in front of him. Then he sat on it and meditated upon the first origin."

¶ The Hindus have devised a "highly formalized and cultivated gesture language," divinely expressive of the spiritual moods and qualities of their deities.

¶ "Some of these gestures, apart from their spiritual significance and symbolism, are wonderfully articulate with a grace and a tenderness which is truly spiritual and non-human. These movements of the hands and 'finger plays' (Mudras) have been characteristically called by Sukracharya (a sage) as 'divya-kriya' or divine actions, being distinguished in their conventions from the movements and gestures of ordinary human beings." — O. C. Gangoly.

## NRITANJALI

- The arts, having originated from the gods, were said to have been taught to human beings by rishis or great sages, who were the ancient custodians of sacred knowledge, of arts and sciences.
- The attainment of high spiritual powers by the individual was associated with certain postures of the body, and gestures, which not only aided concentration, but were capable of evoking the inner spiritual consciousness.
- Mudras or dance-gestures set forth in the Natya Shastra of Bharata included the divine actions of celestial dancers and their application to the feelings and aspirations of human beings. The representation of the Rasas or emotions in gesture and posture were based on certain *archetypal forms* which idealized the plastic conceptions of emotion.
- The description and use of gestures which are given here will serve to illustrate the importance of gesture in Hindu dancing.
- The Pataka hand originates from Brahma. It is

## NRITANJALI

the flag hand of victory, formed by extending the palm with fingers straight and close together, the thumb being also close to the hand. Praised with palm facing the spectators, the *Pataka* hand indicates assurance and grace. This gesture appears in the cosmic dance forms of Shiva and is the gesture of other devas. It indicates the beginning or end of discourse.

¶ *Pataka* hands are twisted upward for the world of the gods, and downward for the lower worlds. *Pataka* hands crossed at the wrists indicate the sign Swastika. *Pataka* hands joined palm to palm in devotional gesture are used in prayer or salutation to gods and worthy men. This form is called *Anjali*.

¶ If *Pataka* hands are shown with movement of arms in various directions showing grace and amorous expression, the feet moving rhythmically, the dance performed thus is called *Prasara*.

¶ The *Ardha-chandra* hand (half-moon) is formed by stretching the thumb of the *Pataka* hand to form an angle with the hand. This Mudra indicates con-

## NRITANJALI

secration or meditation. Making *Ardha-chandra* with both hands, the right upward and the left downward is called *Abhaya Mudra* the gesture showing fearlessness and hope. Only he who overcomes fear is spiritually free. The *Abhaya Mudra* is characteristic of the Shiva dance forms.

- The *Ardha-chandra* hand spread out in the form of a crescent carries the fire, a symbol of destruction.
- When *Ardha-chandra* hands are crossed, palms inward, thumbs interlocked, they indicate the bird Garuda, vahan of Vishnu.
- When *Ardha-chandra* hands are placed at the waist, thumbs inward and the body above the waist is moved rhythmically with grace, the dancer performs the *Lavani* dance.
- The *Tripataka* hand is the ‘three fingers’ pose. It originates from Shiva, and indicates invocation, descent of the gods or avatar. It is also used for holding weapons or attributes, i. e. the *Tanka* (axe), the *Krishna Mriga* (deer), the *Vajra* (thunderbolt)





*Ardha Chandra hand (upper)*  
*Gaja hand (lower)*

## NRITANJALI

etc. The third finger of the *Pataka* hand is bent and joined to the thumb at the middle of the palm. *Tripataka* hand is also shown without the thumb and finger being joined.

¶ The *Sirpa-sirsa* hand originates from Vishnu. The palm of the hand is hollowed with the fingers curved to form the cobra's head. This gesture is used for *arati* (light waving) and water offering at twilight. *Sirpa-sirsa* hands joined together at the sides to form a snake's hood are used for offering or receiving.

¶ The *Padmakosa* hand (lotus bud) is used for worshipping Shiva with lotus flowers. *Padmakosa* hand opened and closed slowly indicates sacrificial offering, also beauty of form. To form the *Padmakosa* hand, draw the fingers and thumb together to make the bud.

¶ The *Alapadma* hand is the full blown lotus. The fingers are separated and slightly twisted or twirled, the little finger leading. The *Alapadma* hand originates from Krishna, its deity is Vasanta.

## NRITANJALI

- The *Padma* (Lotus) hands are formed by joining two hands at the wrists (base of palms), the fingers being spread apart and curved to form the petals.
- The *Hamsasya* hand (swan face) originates from Brahma. The thumb and the first finger are joined, the remaining fingers being slightly separated and curved. The *Hamsasya* hand indicates instruction in ritual or wisdom, and is used in speaking and meditation. It is a characteristic dancer's hand.
- The *Kataka* hand is the gesture of communication or inquiry. The forefinger and middle finger are joined to the thumb. Its usage is for conversation, picking flowers, holding a necklace, lotus, flower garland or other emblems.
- The *Ardha-Pataka* hand is formed by bending the little finger of the *Tripataka* hand. It indicates a dagger, flag, a tower or horn —showing two.
- The *Kartari-Mukha* hand has the forefinger and little finger of the *Ardha-Pataka* hand outspread. It originates from Vishnu and indicates separation,

## NRITANJALI

and death, also lightening.

¶ The *Sikhara* hand is the spire hand. The fingers are closed into the palm, only the thumb upstanding like a spire. Its usage is in erotic moods indicating embrace, lover, or saying "no." It is also used in plying a fan.

¶ The *Kapittha* hand (elephant apple) is formed by curving the forefinger of the *Sikhara* hand over the thumb. It is the gesture of Laksmi holding lotuses near the shoulders. Its usage is for holding a veil or the end of a robe, counting Saraswati's rosary, offering incense, milking cows, or showing a dance with the exhibition of blandishments.

¶ The *Gaja* hand (elephant trunk) is a significant gesture of the dancing Shiva images. The left arm is shown swung across the body to the right, the hand drooping or hanging down.

¶ The *Suchi* hand or pointing finger is the gesture of surprise. Its usage is for turning the potter's wheel or the wheel of time. Following the motion

## NRITANJALI

of *Suchi* hand with the eyes partly closed is called *Suchana*, a characteristic action of dancers.

¶ The *Bhramara* hand, (bee) indicates Garuda, the bird of Vishnu, or other flying creatures. It also signifies a vow, or union with the divine. The forefinger is curved and the thumb is joined to the second finger, the other fingers being extended.

¶ The *Chandra-kala* hand (digit of the moon) is formed by extending the thumb of the *Suchi* hand, so that the first finger and thumb indicate a crescent moon.

¶ The eloquent grace of Hindu gesture depends upon certain fundamental conceptions relative to the use of fingers, palms and wrists. The Hindu dancer considers the palm of the hand the most important center of hand expression. Showing the palm to the spectators with various disposal of the fingers is characteristic of Hindu gesture language.

¶ In the West, one rarely sees the palm of a dancer's hand. The profile outline of the hand with



Kataka hand (upper)  
Ardha Chandra hand for holding fire (lower)



## NRITANJALI

the fingers arranged in an elegant pose finds favor with Western dancers.

¶ The wrist too has little individuality of expression, except in certain plastic dances, and so-called oriental representations where undulating or upward and downward movements of the hands allow a certain flexibility.

¶ In Hindu dancing the wrist becomes a pivot for the movement of the hand in any direction. The motions are further supplemented by expressive use of the elbows.

¶ No gesture is made without definite meaning and each dance has a story. If it is not sung from time to time by the dancer herself, the meaning is nevertheless very definitely in mind, and is carried out by gestures, facial expressions, and various movements of the head and body.



## VI

### PLASTIC HARMONY OF MOVEMENT

- The plastic interpretation of the Rasas or spiritual sentiments is accomplished in Hindu dancing by rhythmic sways or flexions of the body. These movements are the visible representation in actions of the refined sentiments and aspirations of human beings—and the divine moods of deities.
- The ideal postures of the body in movement are based upon the *Bhangas* or bends which represent the deviations of the body from the central plumb line or equipoise of the figure. These bends are called *Abhanga* (slightly bent), *Samabhanga* (equally bent) i. e. in equilibrium, *Atibhanga* (greatly bent), and *Tribhanga* (thrice bent).
- The *Abhanga* pose is shown in standing grace-

## NRITANJALI

fully with the weight of the body placed on one leg. It indicates meditation, repose and serenity.

¶ The *Samabhanga* pose is "the plastic equivalent to spiritual equilibrium." It is the gracious pose of seated or standing figures in equipoise.

¶ The *Atibhanga* postures are concerned with the dramatic dance forms called Tandava, i. e. the elegant Nataraja poses of the dancing Shiva—the ecstatic dance of Krishna, and others.

¶ The *Tribhanga* posture is the thrice bent figure in which the head is inclined to one side, the torso is bent in the opposite direction, and the part of the body below the waist takes again the reverse direction. The Tribhanga actions are dramatic, dynamic flexions.

¶ An appreciative interpretation of the vitality and grace of movement shown in two sculptured female dance-figures is conveyed in the following paragraph:

¶ "The sharp, precise angles of heel, knee, hip,





*Bhiramara hand (upper)*  
*Hamsasya hand (lower)*

## NRITANJALI

elbow and wrists are but the utmost suppleness and flowing curve that twists the dancer's body in a tribhangha, that has as much shyness, as it has aggressive life. Another dancer in similar distortion lifts up her arms fragile like glass, and her fingers do not seem to belong to her any longer but grow out of her like the capricious leaves of a young tree, which for the first time has spring."\*

¶ The distorted or bent postures of the limbs which characterize the dramatic Tandava dances somewhat resemble the 'turned out' positions of ballet dancers. The use of feet and limbs however is quite different.

¶ The leg is often bent triangular-wise, the foot being lifted from the ground slightly or raised up as high as the opposite knee. These bends of the limbs often have corresponding bends or flexions of the head.

¶ Expressive movements of the head are an essential part of Hindu dancing. There are said to be nine fundamental movements and a great many sub-

\*Stella Kramrisch in "*The Modern Review*"—Nov. 1923.

## NRITANJALI

tle and discriminating variations.

¶ The *Sama* or level pose of inertia which precedes action, establishes the serene and gracious mood that clears the mind of distractions. It is the auspicious pose which precedes all performances.

¶ In the Tandava dance modes, particularly those in the Ras of Adbhut (the sense of wonder or astonishment), the head is nodded in a commanding manner, shaken from side to side, or deliberately moved forward and to each side with a flexible stretching of the neck. These movements are to be shown with wide open and shining eyes and uplifted brows.

¶ In the fierce moods like Bhayanaka (inspiring fear or awe) and Raudra (cruel or terrifying), the head is nodded slowly with wide open eyes, pupils fluttering or fixed (as occasion demands) eyebrows contracted. The head may be rocked smoothly from side to side, with an upward snake-like motion of the sides of the neck—a serpentine flexion which gives a weird, super-natural effect.

¶ Sometimes the head is rolled with a circular

## NRITANJALI

motion to indicate the excitement of combative actions and the wielding of destructive weapons.

¶ The heroic mood (Vir) expresses majesty, radiant elegance and ecstasy. The head is held high with direct and level gaze, turned rhythmically from side to side, eyes following—or directed upward and downward with a side-wise motion in which the glance is keen and active, and the torso flexion has prominence.

¶ Erotic moods are indicated by fascinating and graceful movements of the head. The drooping head of modesty or sorrow—the alternate side to side motion with brilliant and rapturous glances—the tossed aside and upward movement, showing pride, aversion or playful denial—are all supple and delicate in their charm.

¶ The peculiar fascination and snake-like suppleness of other swinging motions of the head are achieved by rhythmic movements of the neck of which there are said to be four kinds.

## NRITANJALI

- ¶ There is the fan-wise swing of the head from side to side, indicating love or yearning, or reflection, according to the facial expression and disposal of the limbs.
- ¶ There is the horizontal side to side motion of approval, showing blandishments and grace of movement.
- ¶ There is the half-moon swing of enchantment and the forward and backward pigeon-like motion indicating "You and I."
- ¶ The Alolita or rolling head moved gracefully in a circle, shows an ecstatic mood of love and laughter; or, according to certain variations and intense vigor of body movement and gesture, it is expressive of excitement, anger and obsession.
- ¶ All of these movements are executed with plastic smoothness and rhythm comparable to the unconscious, natural grace of wild creatures.
- ¶ Beating the ground with heel or toe is charact-

## NRITANJALI

eristic of all forms of Hindu dancing. Rhythmic accent with the feet is very important, for no step is left to chance or impulse, and the bells upon the dancer's feet must always be in unison with the drum beat.

¶ Lasya dancing is accompanied by the soft beating of heels or toes. The heroic Tandava is more conspicuously accentuated, and makes use of thumping beats of heel and toe, with a freer swing of the limbs.

¶ In Hindu music no liberties are taken with the rhythm. There are no ritards or sustained climaxes which break the rhythmic flow of music that is governed by measure. The swing of the rhythm is like the pendulum of a clock. Within its compass the time may be doubled or twice as fast; it may be twice as slow, or a four beat time may change to a six beat without altering the main accents of the rhythm.

¶ The understanding between dancer and musicians is therefore perfect. They are always in

## NRITANJALI

unison. The dancer is not concerned with the necessity of interpreting a composer's intention. There are no scores or notes to be played. The modes of melody and rhythm are so thoroughly mastered that the instrumentalists are in a sense *creators* of an infinite variety of melodic and rhythmic patterns within the prescribed forms.

¶ The emotions and spiritual moods of the various melodies (Ragas) and rhythms (Talas) have been fixed by the canons of art which also devised their visible plastic representation in dance form. Dancing has therefore a power and vitality of expression which is in no sense inferior to that of music. But the union of the two is inevitable, since Hinduism defines sound as the primary symbol of *creative energy* or of the *activity* of Nature, the drum being it's emblem.

## VII

### RACE-SPIRIT AND THE DANCE

¶ In the East art has been developed and sustained through the ages by pure devotion. The Hindu attitude toward art as an expression of the Inner Beauty or Divine in man has brought it into close connection with religion.

¶ In the West, the gradual disassociation of art and the church has led to the development of a predominately secular art-expression which, while it may claim for itself the lofty idealism of a Wagner or a Scriabin, or the spiritual purity of a Passion Play performance, finds its popular appeal in pandering to a restless, pleasure-seeking public which pays homage to the exalted conceptions of art, but prefers its frivolous entertainment.

## NRITANJALI

¶ Large cities, the centers of industrialism, especially in America, set the theatrical fashions including dancing. Most city folk are aggressively engaged in the struggle for existence or the acquirement of wealth. They seek diversion and forgetfulness in the thrills of spectacular entertainment where music is loud and dancers present their snappiest and most astonishing steps, bringing to their aid acrobatic devices of every conceivable sort. Here there is no opportunity for intimacy, authenticity or simplicity. If the dance expressions of various nations are recruited into the theatre, it is very often for the sake of novelty or exoticism which disregards almost entirely the true spirit or authenticity of the original dance.

¶ There are an ever-increasing number of dancers in the West who feel that dancing has a higher function than to furnish pastime-antics to an amusement-seeking public. For these dancers the ancient dances of the East have a deeper meaning than the mere outward expression of exotic patterns.

¶ The dances of various races offer a rich field for



*Krishna and Gopi Musicians*

*From an Indian Painting*



## NRITANJALI

terpsichorean research to honest and sincere disciples. The dance expressions of different races or nations are in a sense *race-modes* or the plastic embodiment of a *race-spirit*.

¶ The writer recalls an occasion when folk dances were presented by many national groups. There was a charming Swedish folk dance, in which girls and their swains participated. Here the vital race-spirit of Scandinavia was expressed with a vigor and swing that conveyed more in a few moments than many books could have told. The simultaneous beat of their feet on the ground had in it a joyous earth-sense which was expressive of the rhythm of Nature itself. There was no philosophy nor symbolism in the minds of these lithe young people. Their spirit of rhythm and exaltation was natural and without artifice. But the race-spirit of generations shone through their smiles and postures in a way that one could never forget.

¶ Another dance by a group of Mexican Indians permitted a glimpse into their spirit. This dance was associated with the sowing of corn, and the

## NRITANJALI

primitive dress and descriptive gestures of the dancers had a quaint and simple charm. At one place in the dance they all gave a little hop and a peculiar shout which was fascinating. These were simple children of the soil who loved the warm sun and the smell of the earth. The Mexican dance was primitive but it was performed with a devotional joy that made of it a rite.

¶ The dances of the ancients were essentially a sacred rite. In India, where all forms of art were united to religion, the art of representing the inner experience of the human soul found its highest expression in music and dancing. The arts of India are a revelation of many thousands of years of culture and civilization. The Hindu conception of the dance, as the visible representation of the mystic rhythm of the Universe, is in a sense symbolic of the race-spirit of India, that land grown old in wisdom and the ways of life when the "West" was not yet born.

FINIS



